



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025 with funding from
Graduate Theological Union

<https://archive.org/details/christianapproac00unse>

THE CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO AFRICAN ANIMISM

A Thesis

submitted in candidacy for the degree of

Bachelor of Divinity

in the

Berkeley Baptist Divinity School

by

Philip J. Uhlinger



Department of
Missions

March the tenth, 1947
Berkeley, California

CBBD

SYNOPSIS OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

PAGE

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Limitation of the Field.....	1
Method.....	1
Sources.....	2
Definition.....	2
I. ANIMISTIC RELIGION IN GENERAL.....	3
Definition.....	3
Extent.....	4
Characteristics.....	5
Belief in Spirits.....	5
Worship.....	6
Taboo.....	7
Control.....	8
Distinguishing Features of African Animism.....	9
II. THE IDEA OF GOD.....	12
Extent of Belief in God.....	12
God as Creator.....	14
Remoteness of God.....	16
Other Ideas of God.....	17
Is There Worship of God.....	18
Value of This Conception of God.....	20
III. THE SOUL, SPIRITS, AND IMMORTALITY.....	23
Personality.....	23
Funeral Customs.....	24

CHAPTER

PAGE

Nature of the Future Life.....	27
Relation of the Living to the Dead.....	28
The Processes of Worship.....	30
Motives for the Worship.....	32
Other Spirits.....	34
Christianity and the Animistic Conception of Spiritual Beings.....	35
IV. DAILY LIFE AND MORALITY.....	38
Witchcraft.....	38
"Medicine".....	39
Sorcery.....	41
Moral Values.....	43
Christianity and Morality.....	45
Conclusion.....	47
THE RELATIONSHIP OF A KNOWLEDGE OF AFRICAN ANIMISM TO MISSIONARY METHODS	

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Frazer, James George The Golden Bough, (One Volume)
The Macmillan Company, New York
1927
2. Jevons, Frank Byron An Introduction to the Study
of Comparative Religion, The
Macmillan Company, New York,
1908
3. Kraemer, H. The Christian Message in a Non-
Christian World, (International
Missionary Council), Harper
Brothers, New York, 1938
4. Latouche, John Congo, Willow, White and Co.,
1945
5. Lerrigo, P. H. J. Rock Breakers, Kingdom Building
in Kongo Land, The Judson Press
Philadelphia, 1922
6. Levy-Bruhl, Lucien Primitives and the Supernatural,
E.P. Dutton and Co., New York,
1935
7. Mackenzie, Jean Kenyon An African Trail, The Central
Committee on the United Study
of Foreign Missions, West Med-
ford, Mass., 1917
8. Malinowski, Bronislaw The Dynamics of Culture Change,
An Inquiry Into Race Relations
in Africa, Yale University Press,
New Haven, Conn., 1945
9. Mathews, Basil Consider Africa, Friendship
Press, New York, 1936
10. Milligan, Robert H. The Fetish Folk of West Africa,
Fleming H. Revell Co., New York,
1912
11. Nassau, Robert H. Fetichism in West Africa, Friend-
ship Press, New York, 1904
12. Oldham, J.H. & Gibson, B. The Remaking of Man in Africa,
Oxford University Press, London,
1931

13. Radin, Paul Primitive Religion, Viking Press, New York, 1937
14. Robinson, Theodore H. An Outline Introduction to the History of Religions, Oxford University Press, London, 1931
15. Ross, Emory Out of Africa, Friendship Press, New York, 1936
16. Smith, Edwin W. African Beliefs and Christian Faith, United Society for Christian Literature, London and Redhill, 1936
17. Smith, Edwin W. The Religion of Lower Races as Illustrated by the African Bantu, The Macmillan Company, 1923
18. Soper, Edmund D. The Religions of Mankind, Abingdon Cokesbury Press, New York, 1938
19. Stonelake, Alfred R. Congo Past and Present, World Dominion Press, London, 1937
20. Wallis, Wilson D. Religion in Primitive Society, F.S. Crofts and Co., New York, 1939
21. Westermann, Diedrich The African Today, Oxford University Press, London, 1934
22. Westermann, Diedrich Africa and Christianity, Oxford University Press, London, 1937
23. World Dominion Survey Light and Darkness in East Africa, World Dominion Press, London, 1927

PERIODICALS

1. Clerc, Andre "An Experiment in the Religious Education of African Boys", International Review of Missions, Volume 32 (October 1943) pages 404 - 411
2. "A Survey--Africa", International Review of Missions, Volume 33, (January 1944), pages 49-63

INTRODUCTION

Purpose: This study is made in an effort to come to an understanding of the nature of African Animism so as to find in it the best avenues of approach for the introduction and establishment of Christianity among those people.

Limitation of the Field: No attempt is made to cover the entire scope of African life, but rather to deal with those areas that have to do with, or are influenced directly by the religious beliefs. Therefore, there is little said about the social life of the people and the customs which regulate the tribal community.

The area dealt with includes that part of Africa which is south of the Sahara. The influence of the Mohammedan religion upon African religion is not considered. There is also no attempt to describe the changes which are taking place in the religious life of the people as a result of the influence of Western civilization. It is rather the effects remaining in the religious mind of the people which come from their own primitive religious practices and beliefs which will be our concern.

Method: The method which is followed is to take as many examples from the life of the people as possible, and from these to discover the general religious attitudes. It is realized that what is said about any one subject will not hold true in every part of Africa, but it will try to represent the general condition obtaining in most of the

areas. Throughout the paper, those elements which are felt to have a bearing on the Christian message are singled out for attention. At the conclusion of each chapter a summary is made of the relationship of Christianity to the subject discussed in the chapter. This is intended merely to enforce the stated or implied factors throughout the chapter.

Sources: Access to any scholarly books on the subject has been limited. The sources used are what have been contributed by missionaries, and other writers, dealing mostly with their own experiences. These have all been supplemented by the personal observation of the author.

Definition: Throughout the paper, the term "African" is used in reference to the native peoples of Africa. This is done with the intention of including all of the African races which are dealt with. It was felt that the use of such a term as Bantu, or Negro, would exclude some of the races. An example of such is the Pygmy race which is neither Negro nor Bantu. Other significant terms are defined when they are encountered in the course of the paper.

1. Jevons, An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Religion, page 136.

2. Soper, The Religions of Mankind, page 34.

Chapter I

ANIMISTIC RELIGION IN GENERAL

Definition: In order to consider the practices of animism in the field of religion, it becomes necessary to define what is meant by the term "animism". There are some who insist that animism is not religion. Thus Jevons makes the statement that "animism is not religion".¹ This he justifies on the ground that religion is defined as the worship of the gods of a community by the community, whereas, the practices of animism, especially that part of the procedure known as fetichism, are conducted by an individual for his private ends. We cannot, however, follow either this definition of religion or this classification of animism. When we define religion with William Newton Clarke as "The life of man in his superhuman relations",² we are bound to place the beliefs and practices of animism, primitive though they may be, in the classification of religion. Having done this, the next step is to determine just what sort of a religion it is. It is clear, and will become more so, that animism cannot be described very accurately. This is due in part to the fact that the practices vary with time and location, and in part to the difficulty of determining the characteristics of the religious practices of people who have never set them out clearly in their own minds, much less in any form of permanent record. Students of the subject have, however, made general statements as to the nature of animism, or what sets it apart

3. Robinson, The History of Religion, page 50.

4. Wallis, Religion in Primitive Society, page 309.

from other types of religious belief. Robinson gives us the very broad definition that "Animism is the belief in a large number of spirits, any or all of which may interfere with human life."³ Such a definition obviously leaves out some of the characteristics of animism. Some of the major points are not included which will be discussed later in this work.

Wallis gives us the description of a man who is animistic as being one who "believes that spiritual beings animate many phases and forces of nature and travel about as disembodied spirits; and the soul survives the body."⁴ From the Hastings Dictionary of Religion and Ethics we get this definition:

From the point of view of the history of religions, the term is taken, in a wider sense, to denote the belief in the existence of spiritual beings, some attached to bodies of which they constitute the real personality (souls), others without necessary connexion with a determinate body (spirits).

It is, then, basically a belief in spirits, and in the functioning of these spirits in relation to the lives of men.

Extent: Animistic peoples are to be found practically in every continent. In North and South America are the Eskimos and many of the aboriginal Indians. On the mainland of Asia are various primitive tribes such as the Ainu in Japan, the Lolos and other tribes in the mountain and desert fastnesses of northern, western and southwestern China, the hill tribes of India, such as the Bhils, the Gonds and many others. In the island world of the South Pacific there are representatives from this primitive group. The great islands of Sumatra,

Java, Borneo, and New Guinea, the Philippines, and many hundreds of other lesser islands off the coast of Asia, are inhabited by countless tribes of people in various stages of development. In Australia are to be found the aboriginal tribes which are considered to be very low in the cultural scale; in New Zealand are the Maori who have advanced farther than most of these primitive people. Both of these groups carry on the practices of animism. Also among the areas where the people are predominantly animistic are Burma, Assam, and the East Indies. The largest single group is to be found in Africa where the various Negro and Bantu tribes occupy the central and southern parts of the continent. All of these have been coming more and more in contact with the influence of Western nations. The changes that have been produced have been tremendous. There is no doubt that for the most part the animistic peoples are moving out of the stage of animism. The change is, however, a slow one and is nowhere complete. Many of the beliefs are carried over into another culture and religion.

Characteristics:

1. **Belief in Spirits:** This, of course, is the basic idea in all animism. There are spirits everywhere--in the sky above, on the earth beneath, in the depths of the waters, and in dark caverns and recesses of the mysterious mountains. All nature, especially anything that is the least bit unusual,

5. Soper, op. cit., page 63.

is inhabited by an invisible host of spiritual beings not far away from man and likely at any moment to make their presence felt in any one of a hundred ways. Rivers and lakes, mountains and hills, trees and shrubs, sticks and stones, are the dwelling places of spirits. The clouds, the stars, the sun and the moon likewise are what they are because of indwelling spirits. The animist cannot tell when or where some evil spirit will visit him with disaster. It may be the smallpox which sweeps through the town, or the blight which destroys the crops. Whatever happens is caused by a spiritual agency. Behind this idea of innumerable spirits is the conception of a mysterious pervasive power present in the universe and recognized in many forms of activity. The familiar name by which it is known comes to us from Polynesia where it is called "mana". This power is not fixed in any substance, but may be conveyed in almost anything. The spirits have this force, and can impart it. This concept does not exist in all the tribes which hold to animistic practices. It is known that the conception does not exist among the most degraded savages, that some farther development seems to be necessary before men rise to the thought.⁵ In general, the idea of a quasi-personal force is present and very influential as an explanation of all that happens.

2. Worship: Just what it is that is worshipped is not always easy to determine. It is probably true, as Soper

6. Ibid, page 62.

7. Ibid, page 80.

8. Ibid, page 77.

9. Ibid.

states, that primitive man has not learned to distinguish between a material and a spiritual world.⁶ There is, however, in theory at least, the idea of worship of the spirit which inhabits the object rather than the worship of the object itself. All types of objects or spirits are worshipped. There is also the worship of the departed dead. The thought behind such worship is that the departed dead has not become a spiritual being, but is in need of much the same things as those who remain on earth. If these necessities are not furnished him, there is the possibility of the departed inflicting punishment on his relatives here below. It is generally those of the past two or three generations who are worshipped. There would seem to be little doubt that the primary motive of this worship is fear; thus making the purpose one of protection from evil.⁷

3. Taboo: The term comes again from Polynesia, the original word meaning "sacred" or "prohibited".⁸ Thus the word means a "prohibition placed upon contact with or use of certain things set aside as peculiarly sacred".⁹ The number of taboos is almost endless. There are certain objects or animals which must not be touched. There are individuals which one must not contact at certain times or under certain conditions. There are practices which if carried out would be harmful. To illustrate one of these, an example may be taken from the practice of several tribes in Central Africa,

10. Ibid, page 81.

where it is taboo to indicate the height of a child with the palm of the hand parallel with the ground. Such a procedure would undoubtedly stunt the child permanently. There is constantly the fear that some evil will result if the taboo is violated. It is easy to see how such a system carries over into the practice of the tribe in regard to such things as marriage, or initiation rites.

4. Control: The element in animism which would more than any other classify it at the bottom of the religious scale is the idea that man can exercise control over the spirits which he worships. They are to be feared, indeed, but they may also be used for his own ends. It is in such an effort at control that we find one of the motives for sacrifice. It is generally something which man has made himself that is offered, or something which he desires for his nourishment, comfort and pleasure. Thus food, drink, clothing and utensils constitute the body of sacrifice the world over.¹⁰ A certain value must always be attached to the object offered, or it is not efficacious. Out of such practices of sacrifice grew the class of men known as priests, medicine men, witch doctors, shamans, exorcists, and mediums. They are the members of the community through whom communication is had with the supernatural. They hold more especially than the ordinary individual power over the spirits.

11. Robinson, op. cit., page 64.

12. Soper, op. cit., page 68.

Distinguishing Features of African Animism: Any discussion of a subject that is spread over the whole earth would naturally find many variations. The preceeding brief description of animism was of the religion generally, including the African form. There are of course, many elements of the African belief which though they fall into the general classification, are nevertheless quite distinctive. These will be pointed out in the course of this paper. Many of the practices concerning the dead, and the special place of the witch-doctor are among these. There is, however, one term which is especially descriptive of the African form of animism. This is "fetichism". Of this term, Robinson says, "Fetichism is a specialized form of Animism, and is especially characteristic of African religion."¹¹

The term comes from the Portuguese Feitico (Latin, Facere, "to make"), a word applied by Portuguese sailors to the little objects held sacred by West African natives, which were regarded by the Europeans as charms or talismans.¹² Fetichism has been used by many as a general term for the African form of belief. It would thus include many of the beliefs and practices which are described under animism in general. This terminology is not entirely accurate. There are areas in Africa, in fact whole sections of the Belgian Congo, where Fetichism as such is entirely unknown. We would thus include it as one of the main characteristics of African religion in distinguishing it from the forms found in other parts of the world, but not as being synonymous

with African Religion.

The fetich is an object in which a spirit is definitely induced to dwell. Certain rites are performed over rather crude "idols" in order to place some personal power in the figure. Any sort of unusual object may also be used as a fetich. A fetich that is made is usually the product of a witch doctor. Some strange varieties of objects are used in the fetich. Among these are animal claws, bits of hair, insects, teeth, corn silk, etc. These ingredients are prepared secretly and placed in some hollow object such as a horn, a gourd or a nut shell. The form of the fetich will have as much variety as the ingredients. It may be something that is worn on the person or set up in the house. The effect produced on the fetich by the rites of induction is not permanent, and they have to be repeated from time to time. The fetich must be treated properly in order for the spirit which has entered therein to act as a protection to its owner. Proper treatment does not mean merely the coaxing of the spirit by offerings and ritual, but also corporal punishment if he fails to do his work properly, and the African native has often been known to beat his fetich severely in order to induce him to confer the favour which his owner desires.

A fetich is quite different from an idol, though at times it may look like one. According to the Oxford English

Dictionary, a fetich "is worshipped in its own character, not as the symbol, image, or occasional residence of a deity."

With this general introduction to animistic religion, we go on to discuss in more detail the aspects of the African form of the religion which can be used as an avenue of approach for Christianity.

1. Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa, page 35.

2. Ibid, page 36.

Chapter II

THE IDEA OF GOD

It would hardly seem necessary here to set out to show that there is in the African mind the idea of God. Nassau seems convinced that whenever the statement is made that a certain people do not have an idea of God, the author of the statement did not sufficiently understand the native mind, or he (Nassau) considered it insufficient evidence to invalidate the assertion of the universality of the idea of God.¹ Speaking further, the same author states:

Standing in the village street, surrounded by a company whom their chief has courteously summoned at my request, when I say to him, "I have come to speak to your people," I do not need to begin by telling them that there is a God. Looking on that assemblage of villagers,--the bold, guant cannibal with his armament of gun, spear, and dagger; the artisan with rude adze in hand, or hands soiled at the antique bellows of the village smithy; women who have hastened from their kitchen fire with hands white from the manioc dough or still grasping the partly scaled fish; and children checked in their play with tiny bow and arrow or startled from their dusty street pursuit of dog or goat,--I have yet to be asked, "Who is God?"²

Extent of Belief in God: This belief in God is very widespread. From many parts of the great continent, and from numerous tribes from widely scattered areas, come stories of some sort of a Supreme Being, a God. From the Bulu tribe in West Africa, near the mouth of the Congo comes this account:

In the foreground (is) the ancestor, near to man by experience, of whom an old witch doctor told Dr. Elmslie that these having lived on earth understand men's position and needs. And in the

3. Mackenzie, An African Trail, page 80.

4. Smith, African Beliefs and Christian Faith, page 29.

5. Ibid, page 30.

6. Westermann, Africa and Christianity, page 69.

background, remote, dimmed by long forgetting--the Creator, no more perhaps than a name--no more in the thought of the tribe perhaps than the name of the super-ancestor, the ancestor-creator, the beginning of ancestors.³

Out of his experience with the Ila people of Northern Rhodesia, Edwin W. Smith passes on to us this account:

The writer.....was having a talk one day in his house with an old African chief who was not a Christian. Upon the floor was stretched a very beautiful leopard skin. The chief's eyes were fixed upon it while the talk went on, and he kept touching the bright marks with his fingers. Then he said warmly: 'How beautiful it is! Who but Leza (God) is able to make such a beautiful thing?' Then with his arms stretched out widely he gave a cry, 'And all these things...! Leza only!' And there was deep feeling in his voice when he said it.⁴

Again we have a quotation indicating that the pygmies who go about in the dark woodlands of the Congo evidently have some idea of the great Power. They say:

Kmvum (God) is, Kmvum was, Kmvum will be!
Spirits up there, men down here, Kmvum all by himself.
Kmvum the High One!⁵

From these few examples may be seen the fact that there is some sort of idea of the existence of God among the various tribes of Africa. Anything extraordinary and incomprehensible may be given the name of God. "When man is faced by something utterly beyond his power to deal with, a plague of locusts, a terrible thunderstorm, the mighty roaring of the sea, he will say, 'It is God'. 'He died the death of his God' is said of a person whose death cannot be attributed to a known cause!"⁶

7. Ibid, page 68.

8. Ibid, page 68.

9. Nassau, op. cit., page 37.

The idea of God is closely tied up with the folk-tales of the people. The Shilluk have a story of hare, hyena, and God meeting with adventures not at all appropriate to a God.⁷ Here, as Westermann says, "He plays a purely human part and is sometimes introduced as an arch-magician or even a goblin."⁸ What then, is the character and significance of this God about whom there is general, though varied, belief?

God as Creator: The primary thought in the mind of the African about God is of Him as a creator. Nassau records for us what was to him a typical conversation on the subject of God:

If suddenly they should be asked the flat question, 'Do you know Anyambe (God)?' they would probably tell any white visitor, trader, traveller, or even missionary, under a feeling of their general ignorance and the white man's superior knowledge, 'No!' (This will help to explain, what is probably true, that some natives have sometimes made the thoughtless admission that they 'know nothing about a God.') 'What do we know? You are white people and are spirits; you come from Njambe's (God's) town, and know all about him!' I reply, 'No, I am not a spirit; and, while I do indeed know about Anyambe, I did not call him by that name. It's your own word. Where did you get it?' 'Our forefathers told us that name. Njambe is the One-who-made-us. He is our Father.' Pursuing the conversation, they will interestedly and voluntarily say, 'He made these trees, that mountain, this river, these goats and chickens, and us people.'⁹

There are various words used for God which convey the idea of a Creator. In the Ila language, the word "bumba" which is widely used of a woman forming a pot with her hands, is used equally of the operation of making the earth and

10. Smith, op. cit., page 31.

11. Ibid, page 31.

12. Ibid, page 32.

everything there is. Thus they give to God the name "Lubumba," "The Maker". The Kamba of Kenya give him the name "Mwawangi", "He who has made by cutting", the word being derived from the word used of a man who takes wood and makes it into a seat by cutting with an instrument.¹⁰ Thus, do other tribes give similar names to the Deity. Smith makes the interesting observation that always the word used gives the sense of making a new thing out of something which was in existence before, and adds, "Possibly the Africans do not let their thoughts go far enough back to be troubled about how the first things were made out of nothing."¹¹

As to the method of creation, there are many and very interesting variations. The natives of the Congo would liken the creation to the habits of a certain wasp. This wasp seals up in a mud house some other type of insect to be used for food for the young wasps to be hatched from her eggs. When people see coming out from the house of earth not a fly or other insect such as they saw put into it, but a wasp like the one they saw making the house and putting in those things, they get the idea that the wasp has made an insect like itself--out of a worm has made a living animal with wings. That is doing on a small scale what God does on a great scale.¹² Various authors report that the Zulu have a story of all nations having come up out of a hole. Black men, they say, came out with only a small number of cattle, a

13. Ibid, page 32.

14. Ibid, page 70.

15. Mackenzie, op. cit., page 82.

little grain, and some spears and fire. Other Africans have a clearer idea of the connection between the Highest Being and man. The Kamba say that the first man and woman were sent down from the clouds by "God" together with a cow, a goat and a sheep. The idea of the Fioti is that men were formed by "God" out of earth mixed with the blood of animals.¹³

From the fact that it is God who created and who maintains the world and everything therein, the conclusion is drawn that he is well disposed towards man. 'He is good, for he has never withdrawn from us the good things which he gave us' (Ewe). 'He is the one who causes us to walk about and do our work, he causes rain to pour down on our fields and the sun to shine; because we see all these things of his we say he is good' (Kpelle).¹⁴

Remoteness of God: The general belief regarding God is that although he was the creator, he is no longer directly interested in this world. (Some of the above quotations may seem to be exceptions to this statement.) The prevailing notion seems to be that God, after having made the world and filled it with inhabitants, retired to some remote corner of the universe and has allowed the affairs of the world to come under the control of evil spirits. Thus, Miss Mackenzie states, "And everywhere of God it is said--that he forgot. He created, and He forgot."¹⁵ Writing of the creator of the Tumbuka tribe of Central Africa,

16. Ibid.

17. Smith, op. cit., page 56.

18. Ibid, page 37.

Donald Fraser says, "He is an absentee deity."¹⁶ The Ewe tribe of West Africa are said to have the tradition that

....in those early times the sky was so near the earth that it might be touched by men's hands. Mawu, the Highest Being, was then very near. When men made fire the smoke got into Mawu's eyes and gave him pain; after a time he became tired of this and went far away. Some say that in those days people got their hands clean by giving them a rub on the sky and that grain-stampers were pushed by them into Mawu's face; so Mawu got angry and went off to a great distance.¹⁷

From this and many similar stories, it would seem clear that the belief of a great number of Africans is that at the start God was with men and they were friends. From man's wrong doing or foolish behaviour, God removed himself, and is now separate from the affairs of men.

Other Ideas of God: It is quite understandable that the Africans regard God as being somewhat of a living personality, much as they themselves are. Thus many of his characteristics are similar to those possessed by men. There is, however, no attempt to regard the deity as possessing physical qualifications. Thus an old pygmy is quoted as saying the following:

Who is able to make an image of Kmvum (God)? He has no body. See, Kmvum is like a word which comes out of your mouth. Make, then, an image of it and come with it to me! The word! It is no more; it is past; and still it is living all the time--today and tomorrow! So is Kmvum!¹⁸

God is also thought of as some sort of a law-giver. In this connection an outstanding quality of God is his justice. In a world where injustice, cruelty and oppression seem so

19. Nassau, op. cit., page 38.

often to triumph, man tries to comfort himself by believing that through God's impartial judgement everything will ultimately come right and the evil-doer will have to appear before a judge. This idea is not clearly thought out, but in some faint way they have a notion that God makes for righteousness. His name is commonly used in oaths. Thus, one of the Ila may say, "Before God I did not take what is not mine. No; if I did, then may I not see the start of the day." The idea is that if what he says is false, God, who is the judge, will put the false witness to death. It is quite important to notice that for the most part, all the ideas about God are of a high moral nature, although they do not begin to come up to the Christian standard.

Is There Worship of God? All this knowledge of God is for the most part simply a theory. It is an accepted belief, but it does not often influence their lives. Thus Nassau tells us, "God is not in all their thought. In practice they give Him no worship. God is simply counted out."¹⁹ The main difference that seems to exist between God and the other divinities or spirits is the fact that the divinities have offerings made to them, while God does not. There are, however, exceptions to the general rule that God is not addressed in prayer or through sacrifices. Miss Mackenzie has this to say on the subject:

Of certain tribes of the Bantu it is said that they pray to the Creator--in matters of life and death

20. Mackenzie, op. cit., page 87.

21. Nassau, op. cit., page 39.

22. Smith, op. cit., page 69.

and in times of great stress. The people of Nyasaland in case of epidemics, in the person of their chief address the creator, 'Pass by, God, and do not punish us, but render us aid.' Such a prayer is accompanied by a sacrifice.²⁰

Dr. J. L. Wilson is quoted as saying,

On some rare occasions, as at the ratification of an important treaty, or when a man is condemned to drink the 'red-water ordeal', the name of God is solemnly invoked;²¹

The general attitude of the African is summarized very well by Smith who has this to say:

Now, as we saw before, Africans do have the idea of God as far-off, the controller of great forces. They have knowledge of what prayer is--that is to say, they have a belief that unseen spirits are able to give ear to their words and are ready to give an answer. But generally they do not go straight to God. They have the idea that He is so good that it is not necessary to make requests to Him; or that because He is the Owner of all things He has no need for anything they are able to give Him; or that He is so far away that it is not possible for them to get near to Him....If at times they go straight to God, it is because they are not able to get help from others.²²

Thus we have to look to the unusual circumstance to produce anything that approaches a prayer to, or worship of, a God in the sense so common in the higher religions and which culminates in the Christian ideal of prayer. It would seem that the power of the fetich is sufficient to ward off the common evils. When great danger comes, and the lesser spirits have failed, then God is called upon.

In summary, the idea of God would be first of all that of the creator, who at the present time is not directly

interested in the affairs of men. In a vague way, God stands for that which is good and just, and whom, it is hoped, will execute justice when it is impossible for man to do so. God is very rarely worshipped, and He is only called upon in times of dire need.

Value of this Conception of God: The value of any conception of any kind of a Supreme Being in approaching a people is easy to see. In beginning missionary work, there is no need to prove the existence of God. The missionary will find among certain African peoples those who are as sure of God's existence as he himself is. How very much more difficult would be his work, were it otherwise and he had to demonstrate God's existence, and teach the value of prayer to an unseen being. This, however, is only the foundation. It matters a great deal that men should believe in God's existence, but it matters ever so much more what kind of a God they believe in. What few vague ideas of God are in the mind of the African are such, that if pointed out and magnified may be applied to the Christian God. His interest in them through the act of creation may be shown to be carried further into every-day life. His role as a giver of laws may be used to demonstrate their own lack of keeping the laws which are said to come from God. Many African sayings about God might be applied to the God of the Bible, and the African will immediately understand what the missionary

means when he tells him that he has come to make them more fully acquainted with the God of their fathers. Caution must be used to fully acquaint oneself with the particular conception of God held by a given tribe. The name that is carried over into the Christian teaching must imply at the least the basic qualities of God. The name should never be of some lesser deity, but should be that of the great, good creator.

All this, of course, is only the foundation. There is perhaps more in the way of contrast between the Christian God and the African, than there is of similarity. The great task of the Christian messenger is to acquaint them with a God who is not far-off and remote from their daily lives. This will naturally lead to a personal confidence and trust in God which is impossible in a view of a remote God. The next step is to a knowledge of a God who not only does them no harm, but is interested in their well-being, in fact expresses Himself in terms of love. The Christian will also stress the moral demands of God. It has been said that the African is content with the thought of a remote God, for a God who is near at hand would not tolerate evil ways. This would be a natural consequence of a belief in a good God, and a moral consciousness in the native mind. His relation to the spirits is not on a moral level, but rather on a practical basis.

Of course, the primary conception of God which is lacking in their belief is that of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is for the missionary to make God present and alive and real to the African by introducing him to Him who is the Way to the Father and by making the life and love of Christ meaningful and credible by demonstration of it through his own daily life and conduct.

1. Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa, page 64.

Chapter III

THE SOUL, SPIRITS, AND IMMORTALITY

The whole problem of the personality of the individual both before death and after is a complex one in the mind of the African. There is no consistency of belief among the various tribes, and here, even more than with other topics, one is forced to draw general conclusions from examples that are available. The ideas of the soul and of the innumerable spirits which are worshipped are so bound up together as to warrant their being dealt with in this one chapter. We take up first the conception of the soul in connection with the living person, or what may be termed, the personality.

Personality: A human embodied soul is spoken of and fully believed in by all the tribes. This animating soul, whether it be only one, or whether it appear in two, three, or even four forms; is practically the same one that talks, hears, and feels; that sometimes goes out of the body in a dream, and that exists as a spirit after the death of the body. This soul is separable from the body!¹ Sometimes a man will go to the witch-doctor and tell him that the soul is to be placed in safe-keeping. The witch-doctor, for a handsome fee, will abstract the soul of the man through a powerful charm and place it in whatever object the patient desires. This soul is very often identified in the mind of the African with his shadow. Thus Smith tells us, "Many Bantu dislike having anyone tread on their shadow or to have

2. Smith, The Religion of Lower Races, page 27.

3. Ibid, page 28.

4. Ibid, page 28.

5. Smith, The Religion of Lower Races, page 29.

their shadow speared."² The time inevitably arrives when this mysterious personality undergoes a change--the real man is separated from the body. Some of the funeral customs would seem to make it clear that the Africans assume that personality continues after death.

Funeral customs: A funeral conducted in pagan Africa will indelibly impress itself on the mind of the observer. As a general rule, the body is interred in the ground. The body is often elaborately anointed and clothed. Among some tribes it is embalmed and kept for a long time before being buried, but generally the burial follows quickly upon death.³ In the sick man's village there already has been a slight wailing all the time that he is dying. Before life is extinct and while yet the sick may still be conscious though speechless, a low wail of mourning is raised by the female relatives who have gathered in the room. The moment that death is declared, grief is demonstrated in screams, shrieks, yells, pitiful supplication and extravagant praise by the entire village. The real mourners are very sincere and demonstrative in their grief; as long as the mourning ceremonies last they neither wash nor shave; they wear old tattered rags and present a most miserable appearance.⁴ Smith has this to say about mourning for the dead: "But while the Bantu grieve, as we in our quieter fashion grieve when a friend or relative leaves us, they no more than we believe that the dead are extinct."⁵ Before the grave is filled

6. Ibid, page 29.

7. Personal observation of Author.

8. Smith, op. cit., page 30.

9. Ibid, page 31.

up, members of the family kneel around it and place various things upon the corpse--a gourd filled with beer, some seeds, a pipe and a lump of tobacco. The corpse has already been wrapped up in skins and blankets, or in some tribes in bark-cloth. This is done in the belief that the deceased will require these things in the other world. In most tribes, offerings of food and drink are placed beside the grave.⁶ As the drink evaporates and the food wastes or is consumed by some passing animal, they say the spirit is consuming it. The whole funeral rite may be kept up for many days and weeks. The wailing, chanting, beating of drums, and the dancing that go on during this period are not allowed to stop. There is a constant replacement of those taking part in these activities.⁷ Fortunately, due to the influence of Western civilization and of Christianity, many of the customs which were common at the turn of the century, have now been almost completely done away with. Thus there was the practice among the Kasai of the upper Congo of killing a large number of slaves upon the death of the king.⁸ Similar customs were common elsewhere:

In Uganda, too, years ago, when the king, the queen, or the queen-mother died, hundreds of people were slain. The royal wives were placed at intervals around the tomb, were clubbed to death and left there unburied. The Uganda people disapproved of their king visiting the grave of his predecessor more than once, and very naturally, too, for on such a visit hundreds of people had to be killed to increase the deceased sovereign's retinue.⁹

10. Milligan, The Fetish Folk of West Africa, page 151.

11. Ibid, page 151.

From West Africa, Milligan gives us this account:

In one instance, in a certain town that I knew well, a very large grave was dug in the middle of the street, and the body of the man--a chief--was placed in the middle of it. Then his seven wives, charged with having bewitched him, were brought forward, and they were about to break their legs and throw them into the grave, when the timely arrival of the missionary prevented the deed and saved the women's lives.¹⁰

Such practices would seem to indicate that the Africans, in common with other primitive peoples around the world, believe in making preparation for the soul when it passes over into the next world. As one would suppose from a primitive mind, most of the thinking of the future life is done in terms of this present life with which they are familiar.

There is one other aspect of the practices associated with funerals which needs to be pointed out. This is apparently an almost universal fear of the dead. This is caused by the supposition that the dead will harm the living. This fear extends to a fear of even the closest relatives. Milligan has this to say about this attitude:

No matter how they may have loved one while he was alive, yet they will not desire that his spirit should linger; but rather in their mourning, they often entreat the dead one to depart. It is heart-rending to hear a mother in the midst of her grief entreat her child to stay far from her and not to touch her. They resort to various expedients to get rid of the spirits of the dead. Sometimes, upon the announcement of a death, while the women indulge in frantic shrieks, or the mourning wail, the men beat drums or fire off their guns to frighten the spirit away.¹¹

12. Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa, page 230.

13. Nassau, op. cit., page 237.

It may then easily be seen that there is a very definite belief among the Africans concerning a life after death. This is demonstrated most clearly from their funeral customs. The opinion of such an authority as Nassau confirms such a view of the subject. He states,

The funeral practices of all the tribes, with very few exceptions, over all Africa however much they may and do vary, contain all of them, as shown by the preceding quotations, a decided belief in, and fear of, the intelligent and probable inimical activity of the spirits of their dead. They include also the custom of the burial with the dead man of more or less of his property, and together with the destruction of such things as cannot be conveniently placed in the grave, clothing, crockery, utensils, wives, slaves, trees, etc.¹²

Nature of the Future Life: The question as to the location of those spirits which have passed over into the other world, is not a settled one. It is not believed that all of them always remain in that unknown other world. They seem to have the power to wander about invisibly and intangibly. More than this, they have the power to return bodily and resume this earthly life in other forms. "The dead, some of them, return to be born again, either into their own family or into any other family, or even as a beast."¹³

The dead being has some power that the living man does not possess, power proceeding largely from the fact that it lives invisibly, or seen at only rare occasions, and independent of the laws of space and time. Things hidden to the mortal eye are no secret to the departed. Moreover, they can

14. Ibid, page 33.

15. Ibid, page 32.

16. Ibid, page 34.

bring things to pass. If the trees bear a plentiful crop of fruit, if the fields give a good harvest, if sterility falls upon the herds and disease and calamity upon the community, it may be the departed that deserve the credit or the blame."¹⁴ Something of the confusion of ideas may be gathered from this quotation from Smith:

So the African will say, in almost the same breath, that the dead have gone to a great village under the earth, where everything is pure and where they till the fields and reap abundant harvests; that they have gone to some far country in the east or north; that they are in the forest surrounding their earthly home; that they are in the grave, which is the house of the dead.¹⁵

Relation of the Living to the Dead: In this consideration, we are coming to what is the most vital part of the "worship" of the African people. We have seen that any such worship is not directed in most cases to any sort of a God. The whole feeling is that the souls of the ones who have died, rather than a Supreme Being, are closely connected with life here on the earth. Smith states that the primary relationship of the living with the dead is based upon the sense of mutual dependency. The living need the dead in battling with the evils of their present existence, and the departed also need the services of the living for much of their well-being.¹⁶ It may easily be seen that such a state of mutual dependency would lead to a system by which the influence of the departed is sought; or, if we define the term very loosely, a system of worship. This would, then,

17. Westermann, The African Today, page 188.

introduce the whole question of what is commonly known as ancestor worship. It would seem evident that the people of this land do put faith in their ancestors, now in the spirit world. The old father and the wise, powerful chief were looked up to with affection and trust while they were living. Now that they have gone into the unseen realm and are wiser and more powerful than ever, they are regarded with so much the more trust.

A basic consideration in this matter of the worship of those who have gone is that they still have their human nature. The best of men are subject to moods; ordinary people are jealous, touchy, fickle; one has to be on his guard not to offend them; for, if angered, they are apt to become vindictive. So it is with the departed; you can never be quite sure of them. Moreover, powerful as they are, they suffer from cold and thirst, from hunger and need the solicitous attention of their family remaining on earth. So Westermann tells us,

A man's strength fails when he remains without food. The same happens to a dead man; he needs strengthening. A well-nourished man is in a better, more kindly mood than a hungry one, and this is true of the dead. Therefore, one should not approach the ancestors without a sacrifice when asking for their gifts.¹⁷

Let us look first at the means employed in this worship of ancestors and then go on to consider the motives involved. It must be kept in mind that after the passage of time, there can be no distinction observed between ancestor spirits and

18. Nassau, op. cit., page 91.

19. Personal observation of Author.

any other spirits. All are members of the spirit world and the worship of each cannot be distinguished.

1. The processes of worship: From a study of religion, it becomes evident that very often sacrifices play a prominent part. We are here taking Nassau's definition of the term "sacrifice" when he says, "...by sacrifice, in the widest sense, may be understood the devoting of any object from a common to a sacred use..."¹⁸ In this African form of worship we also find a kind of sacrifice. In the determining of a locality where the sacrifices may take place, very often a place which was intimately associated with the departed is chosen. Naturally, one of these spots is at the grave. Many tribes erect miniature huts over the graves, or in the vicinity and there make their offerings to the deceased. Others erect similar "temples" in the villages and are careful to remove them whenever the village is shifted to a new site. It is a common sight in many African villages to see many of the huts with several of these small huts around them.¹⁹ From observation, it would seem that almost any place or object of unusual interest may be chosen as a place of worship. Thus the largest tree in the vicinity, a large rock, the top of a mountain, a deep pool may be used as the locale of worship.

The offerings to the divinities consist of things which the living use in their ordinary every-day life; the produce

20. Nassau, op. cit., page 91

21. Personal observation of Author.

of their fields and herds or simple articles of dress and food. Except in the case of sacrifices on the larger scale, as when cattle are offered to the tribal divinities, the offerings have little or no intrinsic value. On this subject Nassau tells us,

Thus the stones heaped by passers-by at the base of some great tree or rock, the leaf cast from the passing canoe toward a point of land on the river, though intrinsically valueless, and useless to the ombwiri (God) of the spot, are accepted as acknowledgments of that ombwiri's presence.²⁰

It is not, therefore, a case of buying the favor of the spirits with gifts of a high price, but rather of pleasing them by an act of attention and affection. Other gifts are supposed to be actually utilized by the spirit in some essential way. In the sacred hut may be a dish of boiled plantains or a plate of fish. This food is generally not removed until it spoils. Sometimes, where the gift is a very large one, a feast is made; people and spirit are supposed to join in the festival, and nothing is left to spoil. That it is of use to the spirit is fully believed; but just how, few have been able to explain.²¹ In many tribes blood sacrifices are common. In any great emergency a fowl with its blood is laid at that low hut's door. In time of great danger, an expected pestilence, a threatened assault by enemies, or some severe illness of a great man or woman, a goat or sheep is sacrificed. Fortunately, now the practice of human sacrifice has almost entirely been done away with.

22. Smith, op. cit., page 46.

23. Nassau, op. cit., page 98.

Prayer plays a less important part in the worship of the Africans and is not often public or formal. Ejaculatory prayer is made very often, in the uttering of words or phrases given out to almost every one by parent or doctor. They are uttered by all ages and both sexes at any time, as a defense from evil, on all sorts of occasions--as when one sneezes, stumbles or is startled. Two examples of prayers that are offered, other than those which are mere exclamations, would seem to suffice here. From Smith comes this example:

Tsu! If it be thou who are causing our child's sickness, see here is the beer that thou desirest and also some tobacco; we pray thee, leave him alone that he may recover.²²

Another example is given by Nassau: "Go away! Go away! O ye spirits! Why do you come to kill my son." The same author makes this interesting observation:

Observe that while these were distinctly prayers, appeals for mercy, pathetic, agonizing protestations, there was no praise, no love, no thanks, no confession of sin, --only a long, pitifully deprecation of evil.²³

These two factors, sacrifice and prayer, especially the former, would seem to be the most important elements of the worship. Some would include the general practices of witchcraft, but these we will discuss later in the paper.

2. Motives for the worship: The first fact to be kept in mind is that the primary interest of the African is for this life and its needs. Very little concern is wasted on what the future life has in store for the individual-- as

24. Westermann, Africa and Christianity, page 93.

Westermann has said, "...the African in his religious beliefs and practices seeks life, not life everlasting, but life here and now..."²⁴ Thus the evils he would escape are not moral or spiritual. The sense of a great need that makes man look for help outside of himself is not based on a desire to obey God's will, but on his and some spirit's co-relation to the great needs of this mortal life. Man, of course, is in the place of need and the spirit is possessed with the power to help. It would be impossible to dissociate fear from these practices of worship. Fear is a natural thing to all men, especially to those who are ignorant to a large extent of the world around them. Fear is produced in part through ignorance of the producer of certain effects on life, and in part through a lack of control over the known producer of these effects such as the powers of nature. Both of these factors would seem to be at work in the mind of the African when he engages in his acts of worship. Yet there is another element which is aroused in the mind of the individual that would turn him to prayer, beside this fear or awe. This might be called confidence or trust. When a man is helpless and near despair, prayers and sacrifice fill him with new assurance and give him back his self-reliance.

As to the relation between this worship and the ethical life, there seems to be very little. "The gods and ancestors are a-moral; they take no interest in the ethical behavior of

25. Westermann, The African Today, page 195.

26. Smith, op. cit., page 47.

27. Nassau, op. cit., page 52.

their worshippers...."²⁵ Smith would see in the practice of some of the tribes of offering expiatory sacrifices to the community spirits at the time of a murder in the community, an indication that there is some ethical implication in this ancestor worship.²⁶ The matters of morality and ethics are more closely bound up with social customs, and will thus be considered in the next chapter.

Other Spirits: Up to this point, we have been discussing entirely the relation of the people to those spirits which are believed to have once been in the form of human beings. We must now take up the question as to whether there are other members of the spirit world, and if so, what part they play in the life of the African. There is the possibility that certain ideas exist in the thinking of the African concerning spirits were either co-existent with the Supreme Being, or were created by him. Neither of these viewpoints, however, is common nor are the traditions clearly set forth. "The general consensus of opinion is that the world of spirits is peopled by the souls of dead human beings."²⁷ This group, at least, makes up the most important group of the inhabitants of the other world. Any other element of spiritual life we would classify as so called "nature spirits". There is little doubt that there exists the belief that there are certain spirits which are, and always were, associated with certain manifestations of nature, such as rivers, forests, mountains, etc.

28. Smith, op. cit., page 51.

We have already seen that such places were held in special reverence. The problem, of course, is to distinguish between the spiritual significance given to some object of nature, and the reverence given to the object because of the presence of some spirit there--usually that of one who is dead. That is to say, is the object merely the abode of spirit, or does it possess a distinct spirit of its own? This is very difficult to determine. Smith gives us this quotation from Roscoe: "The principle rivers, were thought to have spirits, which were credited with powers for good or for evil." Such a statement is, of course, not clear in its meaning. Of his own experience the same author goes on to say, "They too stand in awe of mighty trees and speak with bated breath of some mighty spirit in them, but one always finds that the spirit was once a living man or woman."²⁸ It is perhaps enough for our purpose to notice that the life of the African people is closely tied up with the spiritual world, manifestations of which they see all around them.

Christianity and the Animistic Conception of Spiritual Beings: Once again the Christian worker may be infinitely thankful that there is a belief in the future life. This basic conviction of the great religions of the world has a definite counterpart in the primitive animistic religion of Africa. This idea of a life apart from the purely physical at once opens up the way for an introduction of a system that

bases its results upon transformation that takes place primarily in the realm of the spiritual. It is indeed a great step in the right direction for a people to envisage a life that is not entirely concerned with the physical and secular aspects of human existence. This may be in some ways an advance over the general conception of our western civilization where the effects of secularism are universal. Of course, this whole system of belief, as we have seen, is very primitive. The Christian message can only find here a very meager footing at the most. The task of the Christian worker is to present a life after death where the individual does not lose his personal identity and join the myriad of other spiritual beings. The individual would then come to grips with the moral problems of this life and their influence upon the life hereafter.

Again, any sort of system of worship and sacrifice is of value. Recognition of one's dependence upon someone or something that is higher than yourself is one of the primary conditions of any religious experience. Here, of course, care must be taken that the motives that are present in the pagan worship are not carried over into the Christian worship of God. In the Christian concept of worship, the element of fear is very largely replaced by love and devotion. Prayer, too, is a basic quality or characteristic of Christianity which may be found in the African non-Christian practice.

This prayer must be placed on a higher plane than the mere supplication of the spirits for certain physical benefits. There will be included the basic elements of worship in the Christian prayer.

Thus in these primitive conceptions of the soul, spirits, and immortality, there may be found the bases of a much higher Christian conception of the future life and the spiritual nature of man; and these two elements will be introduced to the realm of ethics and morality where they are now almost total strangers.

1. Malinowski, The Dynamics of Culture Change, page 94.

Chapter IV

DAILY LIFE AND MORALITY

There now remains for us to discuss the practices of the everyday life of the African, and the points where the Christian message will make its impression. We are referring in this chapter to the relationships between men rather than their relationship to the spirit world. We have already noted that for the most part there is very little relationship between the so-called religious practices of the people and the moral aspect of their living. First in our discussion will be the whole subject of witchcraft. Although this might be classified along with the relation of the individual to the spirit world, there would seem to be enough in the practices of witchcraft that affects the daily life of the people to warrant placing it in the present chapter.

Witchcraft: In the previous chapters we have been discussing subjects that are more or less in the background of the life of the native. When we turn to the subject of witchcraft, the question naturally comes to our mind as to the effect of Western influence upon these practices which were so common in the past. If they are to be placed merely in an historical category, they would not be of great concern to us in this discussion. This, however, is not the case. Malinowski states that: "We find everywhere reports that it (witchcraft) is on the increase..."¹ He goes on to say that witchcraft is one method of producing hope and comfort, for

it provides a handle for the unmanageable. This belief will always remain, he says, a symptom of economic distress, of social tension, of political or social oppression. Not approaching the study of the subject, however, from the point of view of the sociologist, we would seek to describe the practices of witchcraft in their relationship to the Christian message. In general, we might say that the subject may be divided into two parts. First there is what we will call for want of a better term, "medicine". The second division will be discussed under the title of "sorcery".

"Medicine": This term will be recognized as being rather common in reference to the general practices of those who are supposed to possess power over the unknown elements which effect life. We have, therefore, the word "medicine-man" in common usage. Medicine is used to distinguish between the cures, either attempted or real, that are offered for sickness, and the processes whereby evil is sought to be placed upon the life of another. The first might be said to be defensive and the other evilly offensive. With primitive man the distinction between natural and unnatural, rational and irrational is shadowy. He might gain power by eating food, but also by rubbing in an ointment containing powerful ingredients, and to the Native both are of equal value. "Magician and doctor are one and the same person, and which of his remedies are to be regarded as magic and which as medicine is a question

2. Westermann, The African Today, page 185.
3. Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa, page 107.
4. Personal observation of author.
5. Milligan, The Fetich Folk of West Africa, page 222.

which interests the European but does not exist for the Negro."²

The attempts at the explanation of disease on the part of the native are somewhat inconsistent. The sickness is spoken of as a disease, and yet the patient is said to be sick because of the presence of an evil spirit, which being driven out by the magician's benevolent spirit the patient will recover. Of the drug used in enticing the friendly spirit to enter the body, Nassau says, "(it) is entirely secondary and adjuvant, and is not supposed to be any more efficient in producing a cure than was the Old Testament incense of the Temple ritual in obtaining an answer to prayer."³ This same drug, however, is often a really valuable medicine. The magician alone knows from what plant the drug came, and he positively refuses to administer it unless its associated ceremonies are carefully observed.⁴ Such drugs are practically always administered by the witch-doctor. He is always a man to be feared. He is more powerful in some tribes than in others; but within his own tribe his reputation depends upon himself. The practice usually is not passed down from father to son, but as Milligan states, "Any shrewd fellow, should good fortune attend him for a while may persuade the people that he can make powerful fetishes."⁵ To such a man there will be application for various objects for effecting cures at good prices. Every success enhances his reputation; and

6. Ibid, page 221.

7. Ibid, page 224.

if he is very clever he will even convert failure into success. If a man return a fetish and tell him it has failed--that his goods have been stolen, his hens have not laid, his wives have eloped, or his canoe has capsized with him--the doctor will not usually dispute the failure, but will discover the reason, and more than ever impress his customer with his skill and knowledge.⁶ Of course, the spirit has gone out of such an object, and the witch-doctor will offer to make him another one for a good price. As to the process of diagnosis, this example from Milligan is taken as a typical example, variations of which are repeated constantly:

Having discovered that the patient has really been bewitched, he makes several incisions on the breast. Then, after an exercise of howls and incantations, he applies his lips to the incision and sucks the wound until the patient screams; whereupon, he takes out of his mouth some article, perhaps a goat's horn, which he is supposed to have sucked out of the body of the patient and which had been witched into him. He again applies his lips, and when the patient screams a second time he takes another article out of his mouth and displays it before the credulous people. Having thus removed a miscellaneous assortment of articles--roots, pebbles, broken pottery and other objects entirely out of place in a human anatomy--the patient is left in a fair way to recover; and if he should not it is surely not the fault of the doctor.⁷

Sorcery: The second phase of witchcraft is the group of practices related to the placing of some sort of evil into the life of another, or sorcery. There must first take place, of course, the divining, or determining who is the individual who has caused the misfortune for which he is to be punished.

8. Nassau, op. cit., page 124.

According to native ideas, all over Africa, such a thing as death from natural causes does not exist. Whatever ill befalls a man or a family, it is always the result of witchcraft, and in most of the cases, the witch-doctors are consulted to find out who has been guilty of it. The trial for witchcraft is by ordeal. In many of the cases, even today, poison is administered. If the accused dies or is seized with great fear, this is sufficient evidence of guilt; if no such result follows, it is a sign of innocence. Formerly the victim was put to death. The attitude of all missionaries toward executions on a charge of being a witch or a wizard has uniformly been distinctly in opposition to them. These executions are characterized as murder. The European governments which have taken possession of Africa also put down witchcraft, medicine-making, and execution of supposed witchcraft murderers with a strong hand. The natives submit under the pressure of force, but unwillingly. "Each man or woman is glad of the strong foreign power that protects himself or herself from being put to death on a witchcraft charge; but they each complain that the government does not execute, nor will allow them to execute, others against whom they make the same charge."⁸ The evils of such practices and the degradation of minds which will believe in the validity of witchcraft are obvious. To such a system, the Christian comes in direct contradiction with an enlightened mind. The basis of approach here would

9. Milligan, op. cit., page 220.

10. Nassau, op. cit., page 208.

be one of replacement through a process of education and demonstration. In dealing with the African "medicine", which appears to be of value in some cases, the Christian should use the utmost caution. Denial of the efficacy of such cures would be foolish and serve only to diminish his respect in the minds of the native. The fact, however, that in almost every case the administration of such drugs or herbs is accompanied with the regular practices of witchcraft, would throw doubt upon their use in a Christian society. At least such a use would call for a careful medical investigation.

Moral Values: Since we have seen that the moral ideals of the African are divorced from any phase of his religious life, we must turn to the area of his social life for any trace of an ethical system. Assuming that along with all other people the native has a sense of what is right and wrong, we go on to the problem of what is the basis of moral judgment. The lack of a general morality among these people has often been pointed out. Milligan tells us of cases where an untruth has been told that would not have possibly produced any gain for the individual telling it.⁹ The degradation of life through the influence of witchcraft definitely indicates a system of society which is not the highest in moral appreciation. Naturally such a system produces distrust.¹⁰ There is, however, a form of government in all of the tribes. There are regulations for the various phases of village life.

11. Stonelake, Congo Past and Present, page 11.

12. Ross, Out of Africa, page 24.

13. Nassau, op. cit., page 139.

The soil of the village and forest has an owner, and no native may build thereon without permission. Even the streams and islands have their owners, though the family and not merely the head of the family may be the owner. Indeed, "Rules on the collecting of wine from the palm trees, animals from the forest, and fish from the streams are rigidly observed."¹¹

As a general principle it can be said that the native life of the African is based upon the community. "The individual counts for little; the family, clan or tribe for everything."¹² Quite naturally there are means of enforcing regulations that are placed upon life. The chief of the tribe is usually the one who sits in judgement over cases that are brought to him. The variety of cases that are brought up before him stem out of every phase of the native life. Such cases as the destruction of crops by domestic animals are decided. The fact of the price paid for the bride would alone produce a great many of these cases. The knowledge of responsibility of the individual in this community is generally recognized. The function of any religious practice in this system of tribal government is, as we have seen, in the process of determining by witchcraft who is the guilty one. It also has the further function of placing on the offender some sort of mysterious punishment by witchcraft. "The fetich is supposed to be able not only to detect all such transgressions, but has power, likewise, to punish the transgressor."¹³

14. Personal observation of Author.

15. Personal observation of Author.

The place of tabu in the social system is a very important one. Very often a person will not steal produce from a garden which has been "protected" by tabu. The outward form by which the power of the owner is demonstrated is clearly understood by all. Many times such a garden will be surrounded by any number of strange objects suspended from a string. These objects may range from an animal bone to a branch of some unusual bush.¹⁴ In such a manner prohibitions are placed upon individuals who might injure property or inflict personal harm. The trials conducted by ordeal are usually limited to those having to do with the penalty for murder or for inducing the death of another by witchcraft. They are largely being replaced by the government sponsored trials conducted by the chief.¹⁵

Christianity and Morality: Christianity, of course, has a great deal to say on this subject of morality. The approach of the Christian message to the morality of the African would seem to be almost entirely in the presentation of a new system. At least, a new motive for moral living must be found. There is, however, the framework of a system, indefinite, and vague though it may be, on which it can build. It is not as though everything had to be classified in the mind of the African as being on one side or the other. There are a great number of practices which being now neither on one side or the other, must be placed definitely in the category of

that which is evil. To be more specific, the gulf must be widened between the medicinal practices of the witch-doctor and the practices of witch-craft which are now invariably associated with them. The native church has already gone a long way in setting forth a morality that is in sharp contrast with that of the native village. Some of the distinctions drawn by the native church would undoubtedly bar a good many Americans from the church in their country. The effort to introduce a morality which is entirely Western in its emphasis is evidently not the answer. Rather there is the desperate need to bring religion into definite contact with the moral problems of African life. There is also the need to bring to Africa such a religion as Christianity which will present an answer to a lacking morality as well as the power with which to overcome the opposing forces.

Conclusion

THE RELATIONSHIP OF A KNOWLEDGE OF AFRICAN ANIMISM TO MISSIONARY METHODS

There are various types of missionary work carried on in the continent of Africa. For the present we may classify them roughly and very broadly along the lines used by a great many of the missionary boards: Evangelistic, Medical and Educational. The first of these is of primary concern to us because of the nature of this present study. We would not, however, carry this separation very far; for undoubtedly the best type of missionary work is carried on, on a unified basis seeking to produce the one all-inclusive result of spreading the Christian message among men.

It is with the direct approach of Christianity to African Animism that we are chiefly concerned. This does not mean a concern with methods or techniques, but more with principles and attitudes. It would be impossible in this paper to deal with individual demonstrations of methods of approach, scattered over all the central part of the continent, and varied as they are. We will, therefore, set forth the conclusions of this work in several rather general statements.

1. A thorough objective study of the religious life of the particular people should be made by the missionary. This, to a large extent will do away with an undue attitude of superiority on the part of the missionary. Apart from this knowledge, the missionary will not be able to utilize any of the values in African religion which have been suggested.

1. Ross, Out of Africa, page 40.

2. Smith, The Religion of the Lower Races, page 74.

That such values exist, we admit. As Ross states,

I am well aware of multitudes of African shortcomings, of tragedies of life and spirit, of limitations of the primitive and of the utter inadequacies of the pagan. But with all that, I am convinced that there are qualities of African life which it would be well for us to examine carefully and with all the objectivity of which we are capable, and which assuredly should be refined and given added temper in the new life Africa is forging.¹

2. Have respect for the local customs and ideas of the people. This will grow out of a study of these customs. "It should be unnecessary to suggest that he should make all his inquiries in the spirit of the physician who studies anatomy and physiology, in order that he may help and heal, not at all in the spirit of the ghoul who studies the same things so that he may best be in a position to harm and destroy."²

3. Seek for points of contact. Some of these points have been pointed out in this paper. There are countless others which will vary with the tribe and locality.

4. Carry over into Christianity the dominating force of religion upon every phase of life. Do not let the new religion develop into something that is removed from life. Such a concept is not present in the native religion of the African.

5. Emphasize the freedom which will come about through Christianity.

Among the motives which cause the African pagan believer to adopt the white man's belief is the desire to be freed from fear. His own religion

3. Westermann, Africa and Christianity, page 100

does not teach fear only, but fear mitigated and temporarily conquered by hope, and hope very often defeated by fear. But fear is there all the time.³

6. Above all, the picture must be presented of a God who is above their primitive conceptions. A God who is interested in their lives, and how they are lived. This is a power which they cannot control by their own means to produce the results which they desire; but one who is loving and who they will desire to serve. We have every confidence to believe, and experience has very often proved, that people anywhere, once they have understood the message of simple faith in Christ, will be quick to accept it.

GTU Library



3 2400 00687 1911

LIBRARY USE ONLY

